DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 822 CG 032 391

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TITLE	The Relationship of Learner-Centeredness and Self-Esteem in Two Middle Schools.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	20p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Change; *Educational Environment; Middle School Students; Middle Schools; *Predictor Variables; *Self Esteem; *Student Development
IDENTIFIERS	*Learner Centered Instruction

ABSTRACT

It is the responsibility of educational designers and educators to understand the demands of the new information age along with the need for learner-centered approaches to reform education. To date, self-esteem research has focused on traditional, teacher-focused learning environments. This paper will present the findings of a research study whose purpose was to compare the self-esteem of students in learning environments with varying degrees of emphasis on learner-centered practices. Results indicate that environments with higher perceived learner-centeredness also have higher self-esteem scores. (Contains 58 references.) (GCP)

The Relationship of Learner-Centeredness and Self-Esteem in Two Middle Schools

by

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The Relationship of Learner-Centeredness and Self-Esteem in Two Middle Schools

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Purpose

As educational designers and educators, it is our responsibility to understand the demands of the new information age along with the need for learner-centered approaches to reform education. To date, self-esteem research has focused on traditional, teacher-focused learning environments. This paper will present the findings of a research study whose purpose was to compare the self-esteem of students in learning environments with varying degrees of emphasis on learner-centered practices.

Perspective

In my life I have witnessed a shift from an industrial age where physical strength was power – to the information age where knowledge and information are power. Branden (1994) believes that the nature of the importance of self-esteem has changed with the paradigm shift from an industrial age to the information age. In the industrial age, Branden explains, there was a need for a few people to think and many people who would do what they were told. However, in the new information age, at each rung on the ladder there is a need for high levels of knowledge, skills, self-trust, independence, self-reliance, and self-esteem. Time has taken the concept of self-esteem, which was originally seen as a vastly important psychological need and transformed it to a "supremely important economical need" (Branden, 1994, p.12).

The demands of the paradigm shift of which Branden speaks are cause for changes in how we think about educating our children – not just cognitively, but affectively. Despite the expressed importance of self-esteem, many traditional middle schools are ignoring the affective domain. Research continually shows a drop in self-esteem through the transition from elementary school to middle school (Eccles, 1984; Harter, 1981; Rosenberg, 1965; Wigfield, 1994). Such a drop is attributed to the stark difference in the middle school learning environment. Traditional middle schools provide

less opportunity for adult/child relationship building, force students into larger classes, provide less personal interaction with teachers, and teachers are assigned subject specialties – teaching many more students – which does not afford them the opportunity to get to know their students (Eccles, Midgley et al, 1989; Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, 1993; Midgley, Feldlaufer, et al.; Brophy & Evertson, 1978).

What is self-esteem?

The literature provides a plethora of definitions of self-esteem. A systematic review of the definitions of self-esteem by Mruk (1999) revealed that there are commonalities that span the definitions. Self-esteem is an attitude that is deemed either positive or negative. This attitude is formed from the beliefs one holds regarding his self-worth and self-efficacy.

For research purposes, the definition of self-esteem that is adopted usually has to do with the instruments available to measure the construct. One of the most widely adopted definitions and accompanying instruments are those developed by Stanley Coopersmith (1990). Coopersmith designed the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) to measure evaluative attitudes toward the self in four areas of experiences: social, academic, family, and personal. The SEI relies on the term self-esteem, referring to

> ...the evaluation a person makes, and customarily maintains, of him- or herself; that is, overall self-esteem is an expression of approval or disapproval, indicating the extent to which a person believes him- or herself competent, successful, significant, and worthy.(Coopersmith, 1990 p. 1-2)

Self-Esteem and Learning

A review of the literature indicates that there are a variety of issues involving self-esteem and learning. Issues range from the simple relevance of self-esteem to education to more specific issues such as the impact of learning environment type and competition on students' self-esteem.

The mere definition of self-esteem, linking competence and self-worth, creates a relationship between self-esteem and learning. Covington (1998) described this relationship as a cycle with performance and self-esteem feeding one another.

A similar, but negative cycle might also be applied to the position taken by Branden (1994) who suggested that a lack of self-esteem can lead to a level of anxiety and frustration. If a student does not have a certain level of self-esteem, being faced with a learning opportunity can lead to anxiety and frustration, which in turn may lead to a lesser feeling of competence and worth – no improvement in performance – no improvement in self-confidence – the cycle continues. In addition, this idea would align with Coopersmith's (1967) thought that self-esteem is an integral part of schooling and performance.

The majority of the literature resulting from empirical research regarding self-esteem and learning has focused on developmental changes in adolescents during students' transitions between learning environments. The works of Rosenberg (1965), Harter (1990) and Coopersmith (1990) reveal that a decline in self-esteem begins around the age of 11 reaching a low point somewhere between the ages of 12 and 13. The magnitude of this decline is dependent on the impact of the school environment as well as other factors of pubertal change.

Nurturing Self-Esteem

The International Council for Self-Esteem (2001) has identified five categories in which self-esteem enhancement approaches are classified: 1) cognitive approach; 2) behavioral approach; 3) experiential approach; 4) skill development approach; and 5) environmental approach. Each of the approaches has been researched regarding effectiveness; however, no research has been conducted that compares one approach to another or that looks at the combining of aspects of various approaches. The International Council for Self-Esteem (2001) predicts that the most effective way for nurturing self-esteem would be a mix of all of the approaches.

Learner-Centeredness

The heightened attention on the need for reforms in our educational system spurred the work of the American Psychological Association's Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education (1997). This group was charged with using the contributions of psychology to better understand the learner in context and to make inquiry into how a focus on the psychology of the learner and learning can contribute to school redesign (APA, 1997). The group's work resulted in the development of the "Learner-Centered Psychological Principles." These fourteen principles focus on primarily internal psychological factors and their interaction with environmental and contextual factors. Learner-centered principles "emphasize the active and reflective nature of learning and learners" (p.1). From this perspective, it is believed that educational practice will be most likely to improve when the educational system is redesigned with the primary focus on the learner. (APA, 1997) The "learner-centeredness" of instructional practices is measured through the use of the Assessment of Learner-Centered Practices (ALCP) assessment tools. These instruments, based on the 14 Learner-Centered Psychological Principles, assess student and teacher perceptions of learner-centered practices at the classroom and school levels (McCombs, 1999).

McCombs and Whisler (1997) explain that in order for an educational system to serve the needs of all learners, it must go beyond the traditional understanding of the teaching and learning processes and focus on the individual learner. Creating a means for the promotion of motivation, learning and achievement for all learners, demands a learner-centered approach focusing on the psychological, emotional, and social needs of learners. McCombs (1999) assesses learning environments according to their level of learner-centeredness through the Learner-Centered Model, a research-validated, principle-based framework for sharing both power and control with students.

Based on research using the Learner-Centered Model, McCombs and colleagues (1997; 2001) found that "learner-centeredness" is not solely a function of particular instructional practices or programs, but is instead the students' perceptions of the qualities of the teacher in combination with characteristics of instructional practices. McCombs (2001), further explains this by describing learner-centeredness as being in "the eye of the beholder" (p.12) - perceptions resulting from each learner's prior

experiences, self-beliefs, and attitudes about schools and learning as well as their current interests, values, and goals. This shows that learner-centeredness does not lie in the design of the program itself.

From the review of the literature we can conclude that: 1) self-esteem is important in education (Coopersmith, 1967; Harter, 1990; Mruk, 1999); 2) there is a decline in self-esteem during adolescence that hits its low at age eleven (Harter, 1981; Rosenberg, 1965); 3) aspects of traditional middle schools negatively impact students self-beliefs (Eccles et al., 1984; Harter, 1981; Rosenberg, 1986; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994); 4) an environment based on learner-centered principles can have positive effects on cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of the student (McCombs, 1999, 2001a; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Weinberger & McCombs, 2001); and 5) programs developed according to one of the five different approaches to nurturing self-esteem have been successful (Gurney, 1987). However, what remains unknown is how the self-esteem of middle school students is impacted when engaged in an environment which is aligned with learner-centered principles and approaches self-esteem systemically.

Study

This study sought to investigate the aforementioned unknown. To that end we examined, (1) the change in self-esteem from the beginning to the middle of the school year; (2) perceived learner-centeredness at the middle of the school year; and (3) the correlation between self-esteem and learner-centeredness of students enrolled in two different learning environments.

Learning Environments

CLC Charter School (CLC)

As stated on the school's web site (http://clccharter.org) and in its brochure, the educators and founders of CLC believe that students learn best when they:

- are actively engaged,
- share the responsibility for learning,
- feel both safe and challenged,

- are allowed time to explore,
- are taught to think deeply,
- use powerful, computer-based "thinking tools,"
- collaborate with students and adults,
- compete with themselves rather than with other students,
- form strong relationships with good role models,
- have good information about the progress they are making,
- are encouraged to be creative,
- are supported by parents and /or other adult advocates who have a sincere, interest in their progress,
- solve complex, real-world problems,
- engage in a series of activities prescribed to meet individual needs,
- are involved in multi-year relationships with their teachers,
- encounter the need for integrated knowledge and skills, rather than fragmented "subject areas,"
- have access to a variety of computer-based technologies at home and at school,
- are motivated by an intrinsic desire to do good work, not to avoid punishment or gain rewards.

CLC students are placed in a home team upon their enrollment in the school. Each student remains with the same home team comprised of peers, teacher, and teacher assistant for the remaining years at the CLC. By providing students an opportunity to work with the same teacher, the CLC provides an environment in which students may develop long term relationships with the CLC educators and students over the three or four years that they spend at the school.

The CLC engages students in solving complex and contextualized, real world problems. Working together, and independently, students develop important skills, knowledge, and attributes that will serve them well in school, at work, and in developing strong relationships and families. In order to facilitate this active, project-based learning approach, students have access to a wide variety of learning tools including but not limited to at least 10 networked computers in each classroom. The ratio of students to computers at CLC during this study was 3 to 1. The CLC also sends an Internet-ready computer home with each student. The students may keep these computers at their homes as long as they are enrolled in the CLC.

The CLC does not employ one specific self-esteem enhancement program, but rather engages students in an environment that approaches self-esteem systemically. Their systemic approach incorporates many of the elements illustrated in the various self-esteem nurturing programs. It is this type of approach that the International Council for Self-Esteem predicts the most effective in nurturing self-esteem.

The APA's Learner-Centered Psychological Principles were used in designing CLC Co-Founder Dr. Kyle Peck's 1991 Reinventing Education as Active Learning (R.E.A.L.) Initiative. The CLC design is based on the R.E.A.L. Initiative, therefore, the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles can be used as a theoretical basis for evaluating the impacts of the CLC learning environment.

Non-Charter Public School (NCPS)

The Non-Charter Public school is a public school system serving students in grades K-12. Students in grades K-5 attend one of eleven elementary schools throughout the district's 150 square miles. Students in grades six through eight attend one of two middle schools.

At the elementary level, the NCPS emphasizes respect for self and others, celebrating diversity, and providing a nurturing environment. Teachers throughout the elementary schools do not use textbooks, but rather use a district-designed curriculum. Although students in grades K-2 are not given letter grades, all students are held to high academic and behavioral standards.

Approximately 1800 students are served by the NCPS's two middle schools. The middle schools are comprised of interdisciplinary teams of five teachers working with heterogeneous groups of students. The discipline-based core curriculum is supplemented by course offerings in Family and Consumer Sciences, Technology Education, Foreign Language Education, Health, and Physical Education.

NCPS students in grades five and six work with one teacher for the duration of one school year, while students in grades seven and eight work on interdisciplinary teams of five teachers. Students may have the chance of studying with particular students from year to year, but by design the process of assigning students to teams does not involve keeping students and teachers together for multiple years.

According to McCombs (2001), "Learner-centeredness is not solely a function of particular instructional practices or programs. Rather it is a complex interaction of qualities of the teacher in combination with characteristics of instructional practices as perceived by individual learners" (p.186). The NCPS has made valiant efforts at designing curricula that focus on the learner. Administrators and teachers have worked closely with Jay McTighe, co-author of Understanding by Design (1998), to create curricula that take each student beyond textbook knowledge and skill to a state of truly understanding what they are learning.

The NCPS does not address self-esteem specifically, but rather works to provide an overall nurturing environment for their students.

Methods

Subjects

For the purposes of this study, data were gathered from students in a charter and non-charter public school in Central Pennsylvania. The Centre Learning Community Charter School (CLC) is a public charter school serving students in grades five through eight. The CLC engages students in solving complex and contextualized, real world problems through a technology-rich learning environment. The learning environment of the CLC was designed around the American Psychological Association's Learner-Centered Principles and approaches the enrichment of self-esteem systemically. The

Non-Charter Public School (NCP) serves students in grades six through eight with two middles schools. Its fifth graders attend one of eleven elementary schools throughout the districts 150 square miles. Throughout all grades the NCP emphasizes respect for self and others through a nurturing environment and special programs; however, their school design does not focus specifically on self-esteem.

Instruments

In order to address the research questions posed in this study, the Assessment of Learner-Centered Practices Student Survey (ALCP) and the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory (SEI) were used to measure learner-centeredness and self-esteem. The SEI was administered early in the school year and again in the middle of the school year. The ALCP was administered in the middle of the school year.

Procedures

The procedures for the experimental and control groups were the same; however, the researcher's participation in the process differed between the two groups. The CLC administered the two surveys according to the research procedures as part of their yearly assessment plan. The Coopersmith SEI was administered twice, first at the beginning of October and again in early January. The ALCP was administered once in early January. The CLC administered all instruments, collected data, and provided the secondary data to the researcher. Although the CLC students were not being asked to complete any surveys beyond those required under their approved school assessment plan, in the name of fairness, the principal investigator provided each CLC student with an ice cream coupon (the same incentive offered to control subjects) as a token of thanks for allowing the use of their data.

The participants in the control group were selected randomly from all students in grades five through eight in the non-charter public school district (NCP). The first packet prepared by the researcher included Parent and Student Informed Consent Forms, the Coopersmith SEI, and a reminder that full participation in the study would be rewarded with a coupon for an ice cream cone. Packets were addressed by a NCP official and mailed to a random sample of 250 students at the beginning of October. Participants

completed the surveys and returned them via U.S. mail. Within two weeks of the first mailing, it was clear that the number of responses received was not going to be sufficient. Although there was no clear evidence as to why surveys were not being completed and returned, we speculated that the fact that the mailing corresponded with the postal anthrax scares contributed to the low return rate. Therefore, a second random sample of 100 students from grades five through eight was made, the researcher prepared packets, and the NCP official addressed and sent the packets. Consent forms and the first SEI were received from twenty-seven percent of the total random sample. Between the first and second mailing, the researcher sent a list of participant names to the NCP official who in turn assigned each student participant with a number code to protect their identity. Second mailings were made in early January to the 94 subjects from round one. The researcher prepared the second packet, which included the Coopersmith SEI, the ALCP, and the participants signed copies of the consent forms. The researcher wrote the student numbers assigned by the NCP official on the front of the envelopes. The NCP official then matched each number with the appropriate mailing label and sent the packets. A follow-up reminder postcard was sent two-weeks after the mailing to those participants who had not yet responded to the second mailing. Again the instruments were returned to the researcher via U.S. mail.

Data Analysis

For the purposes of this study, data were collected from 87 students enrolled in the Centre Learning Community Charter School. In order for a student to be included in the experiment, they needed to be enrolled in the CLC from at least October 2001 to January 2002. In accordance with the Pennsylvania Charter School Law, students admitted to the CLC were chosen based on a lottery. Additionally, data were collected from a random sample of 77 students enrolled in a non-charter public school in Central Pennsylvania.

Two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test whether or not there was a difference in self-esteem scores between the CLC and NCP since there were two independent variables. A one-way ANOVA was used to test whether or not there was a difference in learner-centeredness scores between the CLC and the NCP. Path analysis

was used to test the causal relationships of learner-centeredness, self-esteem, school, grade, and gender.

Results

The results of this research indicate that there are significant differences in self-esteem and perceived learner-centeredness between the students enrolled in the CLC and the NCP. The self-esteem scores of the CLC students (M = 80.00) were significantly different than both the NCP students (M = 62.65) and the national norms (M = 69.08). This difference suggests that the CLC design is not harmful to self-esteem. Additionally, we could speculate that isolated programs designed to nurture self-esteem are not as effective as other, more systemic approaches.

The CLC students (M = 3.21) perceived their learning environment as being more learner-centered than did students from the NCP (M = 3.02) or national norms (M = 3.07). Although, these results suggest that a program designed in accordance with the APA's Learner-Centered Principles can attain higher learner-centeredness scores, we must use caution and consider other factors as well.

With regard to the correlation of self-esteem and learner-centeredness, the results of this study indicate that environments with higher perceived learner-centeredness also have higher self-esteem scores. The standardized solution of the path analysis indicated that the school in which a student is enrolled indirectly impacts perceived learner-centeredness which in turn impacts self-esteem.

Implications for School Design

A number of implications for School Design can be drawn from this study. First, an examination of the results of this study indicate that aligning an educational program's design with the APA's Learner-Centered Principles may facilitate the perceived learner-centeredness of the environment. Second, designers may want to consider not focusing narrowly on the design of their learning environment, but rather taking a systemic approach, considering individual teacher qualities, physical structure of the school, learners' prior experiences, etc. Finally, educational systems designers may want to take into consideration the integration of holistic approaches to nurturing self-esteem.

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